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Former censor being censored by old boss

The irony is so thick you could scarcely penetrate it with a piercing metaphor. The nation's former spy master, Adm. Stansfield Turner — the man who, as director of the CIA under Jimmy Carter, enforces an outrageous agency gag rule — is himself being gagged by those who now run the shop. The CIA's censorship committee, the innocuously named Publications Review Board, has taken exception to several parts of a book Turner is writing on the craft of intelligence.

What makes Turner's case so ironic is that it was under his tenure that the CIA won a major Supreme Court decision denying Frank Snepp, a former agency operative, the earnings from a book he wrote because he didn't clear it with his former employers. The prepublication review rule that snared Snepp has since been expanded by the Reagan administration to effectively gag any official with access to classified material — not just CIA personnel — from ever publishing anything that bears even indirectly on his or her government service, without first submitting it to the censors. More than that, the administration wants to make it a crime, not merely a civil offense, to publish uncensored material.

Turner has complained that the deletions made by the agency have no basis, since that

material is not classified and poses no threat to anyone. An aide says. Right or wrong, that complaint touches on a basic flaw in the governmental policy. It gives arbitrary power to the censors who, for whatever reason, can buy a book not necessarily because it reveals strategic secrets but because it may cast some political or administration figure in an unfavorable light. Or, the censors simply may not like the author.

Turner insists the matter will be resolved by negotiation, but hasn't ruled out litigation. In fact, to compound the irony, the attorney he has retained, Anthony Lapham, was the CIA's chief counsel when it went to court against Frank Snepp. Suing could, of course, cost the admiral a lot, something Snepp would know about. Asked for his reaction to Turner's plight, Snepp couldn't help seeing "poetic justice in the fact that the architect of the CIA's censorship should now be feeling the heat."

Beyond that, though, there's also the lingering injustice of a regulation — so far upheld in rubber-stamp fashion by federal courts — that has the potential to censor far more than classified information and to intimidate countless persons who, hesitating to tangle with the intelligence elite, will keep quiet when speaking out could be in the public interest.